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REVIEWS

FROM WITHOUT THE FOLD

The appearance of a discussion of our native speech written by an investigator outside of the teaching profession should be enthusiastically welcomed by every practical educator, for such a book will reinforce his classroom attempts by securing for them the support of an awakened public interest. Except within the teaching ranks few men would have the curiosity to make such an investigation, few would have the time, the patience, the equipment. If a professional writer and critic is to produce a good account of the language of Americans he must accumulate his material for years, carefully arrange it, and then interestingly present it. All these have been done by Mr. Mencken in the well-made volume just issued in a limited edition.¹ Editor of several eastern newspapers and magazines, serious critic of books, frequent traveler and resident abroad, wide and careful reader in many languages, original thinker, scoffer at pretense, enthusiast for real merit, literary patriot, the author of this book is eminently fitted for the task he set himself years ago. The underlying purpose of this attempt is set down plainly: "I am thus neither teacher, nor prophet, nor reformer, but merely inquirer."

The book is mainly historical in plan. Beginning with the colonization of America, the author describes the diverging streams of language, much as have other historians; but Mr. Mencken soon sharply discriminates between the compromise literary product of the United States and the actual language upon the lips of the inhabitants. Here, as he repeatedly points out, is the great field for scientific study and record of the living, changing vernacular, a field sedulously avoided by scholars, who, however, crowd the library shelves with monographs upon the spoken dialects of England, France, and Italy. The remainder of the book follows consistently the thesis that the divergence between the original tongue of the British Isles and the former colonies has become so marked that the two speeches really are distinct today. This distinction is the result of a well-marked, effective conservatism in the older country—a striking contrast to the radical progressiveness

¹ *The American Language*. By H. L. MENCKEN. New York: Knopf. Limited Edition Pp. 374. \$4.00.

of the new nation. In tracing and listing the results of this quality of men in the new world—those who originally settled here and all those who came later—this inquirer produces the two most valuable and interesting chapters of the book. His discussion of the expanding vocabulary and the pronunciation does not pretend to be exhaustive, but it covers enough detail to give both rapid reader and student a comprehensive knowledge of the processes. In connection with the steady exemplification of the development of growing American speech there is a mass of miscellaneous information and casual comment, not of particular moment in itself perhaps, yet producing a cumulative impression, as do all the gossip remarks in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*.

After the divergence has been traced to the present time, there is a statement of the salient differences between contemporary English and American as exemplified in the two vocabularies, usages, honorifics, euphemisms, and forbidden words. The remainder of the inquiry concerns more consistently the vulgate as it actually is and as it may become. Most striking to every teacher are the foreign influences in vocabulary and pronunciation, both of which are here discussed with adequacy. In the succeeding chapter on the common speech are the strictures on our methods and results of teaching grammar. Pedagogues may bristle at some of the things here said about them, yet educational meetings and magazines have for years been reporting the same conditions and facts, only clothed more decorously (supposedly) in stiff "pedageese." While the grammars continue to repeat the trusting tale of things as they should be, this book sets down the truthful tale of things as they are. Lists of verb forms here recorded from actual speech should be the foundation of future grammatical reform.

The three succeeding chapters—though of keen interest—are less valuable to teachers. Differences of spelling do not disturb us as much as they once did. Nor are the changes of proper names of much practical import to teachers, except as family or local pride prompts enthusiasm. The concluding chapter briefly skims three fascinating expanses—"Proverb and Platitude," "American Slang," "The Future of the Language." While this volume is designed for the general reader, it is supplied with all the devices of a reference manual. The notes are better than accurate; they are interesting. A seventeen-page bibliography and a twenty-eight page finding-list of words and phrases follow.

A review of this book in the *English Journal* should not fail to remark that much of the material cited in text and notes is based upon

reports made by men and women who have contributed frequently to its issues, or who have been otherwise actively co-operative in the National Council.

Last there is a sentence the latter part of which we hope to have changed in the later editions of the book, for which suggestions and corrections are requested. "Of late the National Council of Teachers of English has appointed a Committee on American Speech and sought to let some light into the matter, but as yet its labors are barely begun and the publications of its members get little beyond preliminaries."

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